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Storming heaven: A revolt in Makkah

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The carpenter

In 2010, I met a carpenter named Mateeullah (aka Matee Ghara). 'Ghara' in Urdu means carpenter. Matee at the time seemed to be in his early 70s. He was from my ancestral hometown, Makhad in the Attock District (North Punjab).

Matee was hired as a carpenter by my paternal grandfather in the 1950s and early 1960s to work in the textile factory that he was setting up in Karachi at the time.

Matee Ghara quit the job in the late 1960s when I was born. He remembered me well, even though I had no recollection of him. Matee had quit because he managed to bag a job in Makkah, the Muslim holy city in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

However, I did remember him visiting my grandfather once, sometime in the mid-1980s. But when I mentioned this to him, he actually became sad. Surprised by his reaction, I asked whether I had triggered a memory he'd rather not talk about.

'No, no, *puttar* (son) …' he responded in Punjabi. 'I'd come to your grandfather to ask him to help me look for my son, Munir.'

I asked him what happened to his son.

'He was beheaded in Saudi Arabia …!' He replied, his voice still heavy with grief.

He then added: 'But at the time (in the early 1980s) I did not know this. The Saudis refused to tell me and the Pakistani Embassy told me they had no clue where my son had vanished. It was only some years later that we found out that he had been executed in Riyadh …'

Matee Ghara, an expert carpenter, had quit his job in Karachi and moved to Makkah with his wife and three young sons. In 1967, he got a job at a fledgling furniture factory in Makkah that was owned by a minor Arab prince and managed by a former Pakistani trader.

Matee was one of the earliest Pakistanis to travel to an oil-rich Arab country for work.

'There were hardly any Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia when I reached there,' Matee had told me. 'That country was still barren and flat with very few tall buildings and roads.'



A Saudi city in the 1960s.

But all this was about to change. In 1964, when one of the more dynamic sons of the founder of the Saudi monarchy became king, he came in with a vision to transform Saudi Arabia into a powerful political player in the world; an ambition built upon the wealth that the desert kingdom had begun to pile after oil was discovered here in 1938.

That son was Faisal. He had replaced his brother, King Saud, who in turn had ascended to the thrown in 1953 after King Abdulaziz (the founder of the Saud monarchy) had passed away.

Faisal accused his brother Saud of floundering Saudi money and mismanaging the country’s economy. In 1963, he pulled off a quiet palace coup that ousted his brother, and by 1964, he was the new King of Saudi Arabia: King Faisal bin Abdulaziz.



King Faisal soon after becoming King (1964).

Faisal was perturbed by the fact that even though his kingdom was made up of lands and sites from where Islam had originally emerged (6th century CE), the Muslim world (at the time) was being dominated by men such as the 'secular' Egyptian ruler and leader, Gammal Abul Nasser, and by left-leaning ideologies such as Ba'ath Socialism and Arab Nationalism that had glued together socialist concepts with populist nationalism and Islamic symbolism.

That is why Faisal welcomed members of Egypt's radical Muslim Brotherhood who had either escaped or were expelled from Nasser's Egypt. Faisal planned to counter Arab Nationalism by promoting his version of 'Pan-Islamism' and for this, he was willing to use his kingdom's oil wealth.

But such plans would take some time to materialise. So, Faisal began to concentrate on

his other idea to counter Nasser. He began to 'modernise' Saudi Arabia.

He allowed a large number of American and European companies and technicians to set up shop in the kingdom and build for him modern highways, roads, boulevards and buildings.

This move by him was denounced by the powerful ultra-conservative religious figureheads who had been empowered by his father, Abdulaziz, to help the monarchy keep Saudi Arabia 'on the right path.'

Though American and British technicians and businessmen (especially those related to the oil industry) had often visited Saudi Arabia during Abdulaziz's time as well, the numbers of westerners visiting and working in Saudi Arabia increased dramatically during the Faisal era.

Faisal was desperate to modernise Saudi Arabia because Nasser in Egypt and secular Arab regimes in Iraq, Syria, Algeria and Tunisia had all described Saudi Arabia as being 'a regressive feudal/tribal backwater (that was ill-suited to represent the Muslim world in an era of modern thought and progress).'

But Faisal had to be careful about how much he could modernise Saudi Arabia.

His father had constructed a monarchy with the help of insurgents and fighters made up of

fanatical Bedouins called the Ikhwan (the brotherhood).

Abdulaziz had used the Ikhwan to defeat rival tribes and finally the Jordanian Hashmite ruler of Makkah in 1926 to become king of a land renamed Saudi Arabia (after the Saud tribe that Abdulaziz belonged to).

The Ikhwan were followers of a particularly strict and puritanical strand of Islam that some call 'Wahabism.' In the 1930s when oil was discovered in the land and Abdulaziz began receiving Western businessmen and technicians, the Ikhwan accused him of betraying their trust and of 'dealing with the devil.'

Abdulaziz tried to appease the Ikhwan by insisting that Saudi Arabia was to be an entirely 'Islamic abode' with strict Sharia laws and that for Saudi Arabia's new-found oil wealth to be managed well, he needed western expertise and personnel.

But the Ikhwan were unmoved. They threatened to break away from the orbit of the Abdulaziz monarchy and attack the westerners 'polluting the holy land.'

Abdulziz was alarmed by the reaction and asked British warplanes stationed in Iraq to bomb Ikhwan strongholds near the Saudi-Iraq border.

Hundreds were killed in the bombing, triggering an all-out revolt by the Ikhwan

against the monarchy. Then, Saudi troops and the Ikhwan came face-to-face in a decisive battle around the oasis of Nejdi. Saudi troops armed with latest British weapons, mercilessly cut down the Ikhwan and crushed the rebellion.



A group of Ikhwan fighters (1929).

The few Ikhwan members who managed to survive the rout were allowed to lead quiet lives in the desert. One such man was Mohammad bin Seif. In the 1920s, he had been a commander in Abdulaziz's Ikhwan troops who had helped him grab power.

Seven years after the Ikhwan defeat at the hands of the Saudi army, Seif got married and was blessed with a son. He named him Juhayman.

The son

After crushing the Ikhwan, Abdulaziz allowed the formation of a powerful group of clerics who would advise the monarchy on implementing Islamic laws but were not permitted to ever criticise the monarchy. The group was led by a blind cleric called Bin Baz.

In the 1940s, Bin Baz expressed his concern about how the holy land was being allowed to receive 'infidels' (westerners). He was promptly arrested and jailed. But he was soon released and, ironically, made the regime's official religious figurehead after he agreed not to criticise the monarchy.

He was, however, allowed (and even encouraged) to deliver fiery sermons in the grand mosque of Makkah against 'communists', whom he believed had 'infiltrated and taken over the minds of the Muslims in other Arab countries'. He also often raged against 'the obscenities of modernity' that were never to be allowed to enter the holy land.

So when Faisal began his modernisation project, the powerful Bin Baz was not amused. Faisal largely ignored Bin Baz as long as he didn't pose any direct threat to the Saudi monarchy.

Matee Ghara remembered visiting the grand mosque in the late 1960s and hearing Bin Baz speak. He told me: 'Baz was not very happy with Faisal. He never attacked him directly, but kept saying that the holy land was being turned into a playground of the devil.'

Matee continued: 'In the next few years (i.e. by the early 1970s), Saudi cities began to change and grow. More and more foreigners (including South Asians and Africans) started to arrive (for work), and brand new roads and

buildings emerged. The number of people visiting Makkah to perform Hajj also doubled.'

Matee added: 'Faisal was very popular among most the Saudis, especially young Saudis. But we, Pakistanis, and people from other poor Muslim countries who had settled in Saudi Arabia also loved him dearly. He was creating new jobs and my three sons got a good education in an Iranian school, even though we were Sunnis. But in those days, Iran was under the Shah and Iranian schools only taught non-religious subjects. There was no Pakistani school in Saudi Arabia in those days.'

In 1973, when Matee's oldest son Munir turned 16, his mother implored him to get his religious education from a Pakistani Islamic evangelist. The evangelist had been invited by the Saudi regime to set up a religious school for South Asian Muslims in Makkah.

Of course, the idea was to impart the Saudi version of the faith to the children of Pakistani and Indian Muslim families working in Saudi Arabia.

'Munir began attending this school (in 1973),' Matee informed me. 'But slowly, he began to question the way we had been practicing our faith. He told us that Pakistanis didn't know anything about Islam and were committing sin after sin. I was doing well and my family was now settled, so I just thanked the Almighty (Rab) and ignored Munir.

‘But I became angry when one day, he insisted that his younger brothers be taken out from the Iranian school. I asked him where else will they study. They were not allowed to go to Saudi schools and anyway, they didn’t know how to speak or understand Arabic. At least the Iranian school was mostly teaching them in English. The western schools set up by European and American ex-pats were too expensive. Munir said they (his brother) didn’t need to learn nonsense like history and science and told me to put them with him in the school that he had begun to attend (on his mother’s insistence). He said religious studies are all a person needs. The tension between him and me became so strenuous over this issue that I pulled my other sons out of the Iranian school and sent them back to Pakistan to live with their grandparents in our ancestral village. There they went to a government school for a while, but dropped out and became petty farmers. I destroyed their future …’



Jeddah in 1973.

The school

Saudi Arabia enjoyed a windfall of profits when it increased oil prices after the 1973 Egypt-Israel War. Nasser in Egypt had passed away in 1970 and his successor, Anwar Sadat, enjoyed a sudden burst of popularity when Egyptian and Syrian forces managed to achieve some major victories against Israeli forces with Soviet-made jets and artillery.

However, the United States quickly reinforced Israeli forces and they rebounded by pushing back the combined Egyptian-Syrian armies.

This was Faisal's moment to strike and emerge as the Muslim world's top leader. He stopped oil supplies to the US and other European countries supporting Israel. The US economy, heavily dependent on Saudi oil, began to buckle.

The US was thus forced to ask Israeli forces to fall back. Faisal slowed down oil production and tripled the price of oil, enjoying massive profits from developed nations desperate for his oil.

Watching Faisal emerge as a hero (and now loaded with a windfall of 'Petro-Dollars'), Sadat began to warm up to him. Faisal promised to reconstruct Egyptian economy but only if Sadat would let go of 'Nasserism.' Almost immediately, Sadat expelled Soviet military and technical advisors from Egypt and broke away from the Soviet camp. On Faisal's instructions, he also allowed the expelled members of the Muslim Brotherhood to return to Egypt.

Matee remembered all this: 'Munir came one day and told us he was going to Cairo with some friends. Much later, we found out that the friends all belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of them were his teachers in the school. They were recruiting Pakistanis to set up Muslim Brotherhood branches in Pakistan. But those who tried were arrested by the Bhutto regime.

'Munir said Bhutto was playing a double game. On the one hand (like Sadat), he had come under the influence of Faisal, while on the other hand (unlike Sadat), he wasn't allowing pro-Saudi organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood to operate in Pakistan. Munir was very angry. He said Bhutto was willing to allow Palestinian outfits like the PLO to open offices

in Pakistan. They (the PLO) were not true Muslims, Munir would complain. But when he returned to Saudi Arabia after his trip to Cairo, Munir said Sadat was not sincere…'



Sadat flanked by Egyptian officers during the 1973 Arab-Israel War.

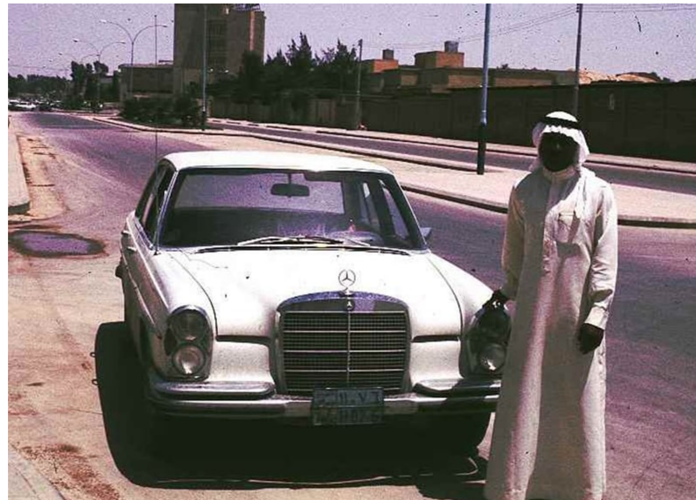
But this didn't mean Munir was a fan of King Faisal. Matee told me that (according to Munir), Faisal was throwing around money to make his regime politically influential in the Muslim world, but doing nothing for religion: 'I started to become very concerned about Munir,' Matee said.

He added: 'At the school, Munir was learning no skills, nothing except a mixture of some form of our faith and some brand of politics,' Matee remembered.

'I asked him what he wanted to do, and how he will support himself and his future wife and children. But he just didn't care and kept saying he only wanted to serve his faith. My wife was very religious, but she was amused when her teenage son began to tell her the correct way of saying her prayers. He also told

us not to indulge in indecencies like watching TV, listening to the radio and all.

'I got really sick of it and told him there was not much happening in Saudi Arabia anyway. TV just had Bin Baz lectures and the radio was all in Arabic. And I shouted at him for calling us indecent. He was unmoved and kept at it until one day I went to his school and told the principal (an Egyptian), that I wanted to pull out my son from the school. Two days later, I was visited by two Pakistanis and a Bangladeshi and warned that my action of pulling out my son would be seen as a rebellious act against the Saudi regime. They asked me to be grateful that my son was being put on the correct path. Then another two days later, a hefty Saudi man came and, in broken Urdu, told me to let my son be and never admonish him. I was stunned. I didn't know who this Saudi was.'



A Saudi man with a brand new car in Riyadh, 1974.

In 1975, Faisal was assassinated. According to the official version, he was killed by a 'deranged' young cousin of a man who had

been shot dead by Saudi police during a riot in 1965. The riots had started in Riyadh by the followers of Bin Baz when Faisal had launched Saudi Arabia's first TV station.

However, conspiracy theorists suggested (and they still do) that Faisal was murdered by the American CIA because the US government was simmering after the way Faisal had used the power of oil to browbeat the West during the 1973 Arab-Israel War.

'There was great sadness all over,' Matee remembers. 'He (Faisal) was such a great man. Had he lived, Saudi Arabia would be so different. Pakistanis were treated in the friendliest manner during his rule. We were treated very badly after he passed away.'

How did Munir react, I asked him.

'By then (1975), we hardly saw him. One day he came home and said that Faisal had destroyed Saudi Arabia. He said he had made it corrupt and unholy. But what perturbed me most was when he said that now the holy land will be cleansed from all corruption. I asked, did he mean the new king, Khalid (Faisal's brother). He just scoffed at me and said that the cleansing can't be done by a king, but by a pious man chosen by God …'

The cleric and the other son

Juhayman, the son of the defeated Ikhwan fighter, was born in the late 1930s. He lived with his parents as a Bedouin in the desert. He

was never formally educated but did receive some religious education. He grew up hearing stories of how the Ikhwan had laid down their lives to bring the Saud family to power and then how they were wiped out by the same family.

Juhayman joined the Guardsman as a truck driver. The Guardsmen was a small government force positioned in the Kingdom's far-flung and less developed areas. On the side, Juhayman ran a tiny clandestine business, smuggling in cigarettes (on camels) from Kuwait.

In 1973, he quit the Guardsmen and came to Medina, where he lived in a small rundown apartment. He began to regularly visit the Islamic University in Medina, where Bin Baz would often deliver his fiery sermons. By now, he had become the most influential cleric in the Kingdom, though he was still on the payroll of the monarchy.

During the Faisal regime, Baz would only indirectly criticise Faisal's modernisation project. But when Khalid took over as King, his younger brother, Crown Prince Fahad, put even more wheels on the project that Faisal had started, and initiated the emergence of shopping malls in Makkah and Medina and American soap operas on Saudi TV.

Fahad also gathered a reputation of being a 'playboy prince'.

Baz was livid. In his lectures at the Islamic University, he began to directly attack Khalid and Fahad. He went to the extent of asking the government to ban cigarettes and even clapping in public!

Faisal had allowed Saudi women to work in offices. Khalid accelerated this policy leaving Baz complaining that 'this act (of allowing women to work) was inspired by Satan.'

But since most of Baz's audiences (at the University) was made up of exiled Muslims from other countries and a few disaffected Saudis (like Juhayman), Khalid did not take any action against him.

In 1976, Baz decided to form a missionary organisation that pledged to halt the wave of 'abominations' being introduced by the monarchy, and to reinstate the 'true faith of the Saudis in the holy land.'

The outfit was called Dawa Salafiya and it began to recruit and send missionaries across the Kingdom. Juayman became one such missionary. He rose quickly through the ranks of the outfit.

By 1978, the Dawa had become a powerful missionary outfit, headed by Baz, and having in its ranks thousands of Saudis. But it also included Yemenis, Pakistanis, Muslim Indians, Bangladeshis, Sudanese, Somalis, Egyptians and even a few black American Muslim converts.


Bin Baz

Matee told me: ‘Years later we discovered that Munir too had joined Baz’s organisation. It (the organisation) was recruiting common Saudis and young non-Saudi Muslims working in Saudi Arabia, but they also began visiting religious schools like the one attended by my son; and (with the help of the school’s administration), the organisation began to attract educated young men like Munir. We hardly saw him anymore. We had no clue what he was up to. It was as if he had begun to hate us.’

In 1977, Juhayman had a falling out with the Dawa. He criticised Baz for continuing to be on the payroll of the monarchy. Baz explained to him that the monarchy might be corrupt and the princes may be playboys, but the monarchy remained to be a barrier against communism and secularism in the region.

Juhayman scoffed at this explanation and quit the organisation. With him also went some other members of the organisation, one of them being Munir.

‘Munir never spoke of Juhayman,’ Matee told me. ‘He would just talk about some pious Saudi hero who would cleanse the holy land. It was only latter that we realised that he was talking about Juhayman.

Juhayman now began to write and publish long essays against the ‘corruption of the monarchy,’ the sacrilege of the holy land by Saudi princes, and ‘their infidel guests,’ and also about how clerics like Baz were not practicing what they were preaching.

Juhayman soon came under the radar of the Saudi police, especially when he began to talk to the members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (settled in Saudi Arabia) about how they planned to topple Sadat. Most of Juhayman’s followers were young Saudis who had come from poor Bedouin families. They had arrived in the Kingdom’s big cities to benefit from the rapid pace of economic modernisation, but had been left feeling alienated and disorientated.

Others came from working-class groups of non-Saudi Muslims from various South Asian and African countries.

In late 1977, Juhayman formed a clandestine organisation. He told his followers to shun all material luxuries. The members also let their hair and beards grow, and walked around in dusty white robes preaching ‘the true word of God.’

They destroyed their identity cards and formed communes in Makkah, Medina and Riyadh, where they lived, ate and prayed together.

The Saudi government finally acted and arrested some members of Juhayman's group. But Bin Baz came to their rescue and ordered their release. The Saudi regime obliged.

Then, in November 1978, the brother of one of Juhayman's closest aids, Mohammed Abdullah al-Qahtanithat, began to allude that his brother was the Mehdi (the mythical warrior-savior who according to some non-Quranic Islamic traditions would appear to spread God's laws on Earth).

Juhayman went along with the façade. It was helpful to his cause. It gave his movement a messianic sheen. Juhayman began to tell his followers to prepare for a showdown with the unholy forces of tyranny, obscenity and greed.

The group began to amass weapons. The weapons were first stolen from the armories of the Guardsmen by Juhayman's followers in the official paramilitary outfit.

Then more rifles and machine guns were smuggled in from Yemen. Bombs and even more guns were bought from the black market that was then packed with weaponry smuggled in from Lebanon, a country that (since 1975) had collapsed into a lethal civil war.

In late 1978, Juhayman quoted an obscure *hadith* foretelling the arrival of the Mehdi who